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Rice vs. Evil

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Rice vs. Evil

Melanie Adam

To be honest, as a child, I didn't give much thought to the meaning of religion. My family celebrated the traditional Christian holidays of Christmas and Easter, and while I was often given the honor of setting up our hand-painted crèche in the nook under the stairs, I had only a vague understanding of the story behind the figurines. The extent of my knowledge no doubt mirrored my brother's interpretation of the well-known children's song, "Who Built the Ark." He was long under the impression that "No one! No one!" had built the ark. Indeed, the holidays were dominated more by time spent with our relatives than by religious observance. My dad put an irreverent rubber monkey at the top of our Christmas tree each year, for crying out loud. I didn't set foot in a church for the first five years of my life.

My parents, firm believers in proper education, distrusted the quality of the public schools in the city where I grew up. So, as a kindergartener, I was enrolled in Catholic school – the only private school alternative. The different prayers my classmates and I memorized became as ritualistic as the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance each morning, and, as their meaning was beyond our comprehension, we twisted our tongues trying to recite our lunchtime prayer as quickly as possible each day. We learned about our souls, which, for some inexplicable reason, I imagined as pear-shaped organs nestled next to our hearts. We filled cups to the brim with uncooked grains of rice, representing good souls, and emptied them out to represent souls overcome with sin. I was excited for the concept of a church, and imagined it would be a pretty, sun-filled building. I was crushed when my class filed into the front pews of an ornate but stuffy sanctuary, where we were to attend mass together twice a week. Our priest was engaging, however, as he accompanied our hymns with his guitar, and I looked forward to his visits to our classroom.

One day, as we sat looking expectantly at the man we had been instructed to call "Father," he asked us to raise our hands if we had been baptized. All of us who had been baptized would go to heaven to live with Jesus! Aghast, my eyes grew wide as every one of my peers raised their hands triumphantly. I had never been baptized. I knew this was a ritual where water was poured on your head, and no one had ever poured water on my head except for my mom at bath time. I had heard the story, too, of when my older sister was four years old and my parents had contemplated

attending church. They took her to be baptized, but my sister cried at the thought of her hair being mussed. My dad then asked the priest if he might simply dab a bit of water on her head, rather than dump it in full force. No, no! The priest insisted. The baptism would not take effect if the holy water was merely dabbed on my sister's head! The very idea! My parents, beginning to remember the very reasons why they had left the church in the first place, took my sister and fled.

Though I made plenty of friends at school, I still struggled to fit in with my classmates and their concepts of religion. Many of the other little girls wore small, gold or silver cross necklaces, which contrasted sweetly against their white collared shirts and gray plaid jumpers. When my mom failed to meet my request for a similar necklace, I set out to make my own. Armed with an empty Kleenex box, a pencil, and some string, I cut a crooked cross out of the thin cardboard. It must have been four inches long. I turned the blue printed side to the back, punched a hole in the top, and knotted through it a long piece of string. Beaming, I sat back and admired my work – but I was not yet finished. Pencil in hand, I earnestly scrawled a picture of Jesus hanging on the cross, crown of thorns and all. I was somewhat renowned in my class for being a good artist, but my drawing was crude, at best. I can only imagine what my teacher must have thought when my parents actually *let* me wear my hideous masterpiece to school, week after week. Perhaps she thought that her religious instruction was really touching me, the only heathen in her class, and that – praise God! –my devotion was shining through.

In reality, I just thought cross necklaces were cool. Kind of like my baptized classmates' power to take communion two years later, when we were eight. Oh, how I wanted to taste those thin, crispy wafers! It didn't matter when the dismal reports came in that Christ's body tasted just like Styrofoam – I wanted to know for myself. However, I was not allowed to enter the confession booth from where I might have emerged with a soul as pure and cleansed as the souls of my peers, and I was not allowed to take communion. Instead, I was given the lofty label of "Prompter." My job was to remind my classmates when it was their turn to leave the pew during our practice sessions. Sullen in my state of exile, I imagined my soul empty of any uncooked grains of rice.

Perhaps my detachment from religion was inevitable. After all, if my father was any example – years before I was born, he dressed as Jesus for a costume party, and there were pictures to prove it – religion was not something to be taken seriously. The monkey on the Christmas tree, its arms outstretched in blessing despite its obvious allusion to evolution, was only the

tip of the iceberg. Though fond of complex political discussion, my father also had an endless stock of sacrilegious jokes that somehow managed to leave him slapping his knee in laughter no matter how many thousands of times they were told.

Despite such blatant irreverence at the head of the family, we were good people by all basic moral standards. A close-knit family of six, my parents were both college-educated, though my mother stayed at home with my siblings and me. Dinner was always eaten as a family, and bedtime stories were read each night when we were young. Weekends often entailed visits to our grandparents, and a week or two of summer was traditionally spent on family vacation – one that would invariably include a healthy dose of nature and historical sites. My siblings and I were active in Brownies, Boy Scouts, and 4-H. My parents were community volunteers and members of the PTA. We weren't perfect, by any means, but I know for a fact that we had a more idealized lifestyle than many of the church-going families of my peers.

Many people are surprised to learn that I was not raised with religion. They find it astonishing that, somehow, I managed to understand enough about morality on my own not to forsake my parents, frequent street corners, or kill the annoying girl who sat in front of me in my history class last semester. They wonder at my calm resolution with spiritual views that more closely resemble *The Lion King's* "Circle of Life" than the Bible's promises of eternity. Though I tend to keep my perspective to myself, particularly when in Christian company, the fact that I don't attend church inevitably leaks out from time to time.

Sometimes, these people are drawn to me, astounded that I don't have a specific agenda – otherwise known as the Ten Commandments – to follow. However, I have found myself quietly distanced from others who seem to prefer not to consort with heathens, or, at the very least, choose to surround themselves only with like-minded peers. In other words, they don't want to taint their own personal cups of rice – no paprika, no decadent dollops of butter. I respect that. In fact, I would much rather be approached or abandoned from either of those angles, than to face those bound and determined to convert me.

Growing up, I recall that an alarm would sometimes sound through my family's home on an otherwise peaceful Saturday morning. When men dressed in dark suits were spotted marching up our sidewalk, we knew to get away from the windows. Like a family of meerkats threatened by a predator, my parents, siblings and I would dart to the inner rooms of our house, all of the lights off, as we listened to the missionaries knock not only at the front door, but the back door, side door, kitchen door, and basement door, as well.

I'm not sure what about our well-tended rural acreage served as a tip-off, but these people had clearly resolved to find us and to divvy out pocket-sized copies of the Bible.

Once I started college, I had to learn to confront enthusiastic attempts at conversion on my own. Only a few weeks into my freshman year, a boy started hanging around my dorm. A purity ring on his left hand was the only really remarkable thing about his appearance, and, though I no doubt horrified him by declining his repeated invitations to campus Christian events, he was nice. He was also persistent. It wasn't long before my friends began referring to him as "Converting Boy," convinced that he had plans to save my soul in order to be able to date me.

Although that didn't work out, this wasn't the last of my opportunities for salvation. Fire and brimstone spewed from the mouths of preachers who stationed themselves on campus at the onset of mini-skirt season. Apparently, exposed flesh was all but guaranteed to lead one straight down the pathway to hell. In addition, fresh-faced youth who swarmed the dorms attempted to strike up conversations about what, exactly, I thought about God. I could only wave them on their way. After all, their lives were entrenched in something that, despite their good intentions, I felt hurt the world more than it helped. As I've never been one for debates, I knew it was pointless to try to argue. It's not that I'm not secure in my own beliefs (or lack thereof). Rather, I realized that the zealots' years of instruction couldn't be erased in one brief conversation, though I might refer them to the works of Dawkins or Dennett just to shake them up a little.

Even attempts at conversion, however, weren't quite so bad as those who pitied and prayed for me. A close friend was dumbstruck when he learned that God was not a part of my life, and told me how sorry he was for me until I begged him to stop. Still, he admitted that he sought comfort in the idea that one day I would come around. My religious views also became the business of my cousin, who expressed his anxiety at my family's imminent doom by sending us an invitation to his Bible study group. He wouldn't take no for an answer when questioning me whether I believed in God, and his car was plastered – I mean *plastered* – with bumper stickers. Stickers that warned me to study for my final exams by reading the Bible, or of the stark choice I could make between drugs or Jesus. I was itching to peel them away in the dark of night, replacing them, perhaps, with a simple suggestion that we all coexist.

See, despite my Catholic immersion, I never really understood religion. I was respectful of the rituals of my classmates – cups full of rice and all – and for a while even took up praying by myself before bed. With

my glow-in-the-dark rosary clenched between my fingers, I thought that maybe *I* could be religious, too. Still, questions plagued my mind from an early age, and I couldn't make sense of the fact that religion was deemed necessary to live a good life. In addition, I saw so many bad things done in the name of faith that I decided to keep my distance.

This isn't to say, however, that I distance myself from my friends and loved ones with religious beliefs. Rather, I embrace those with viewpoints different than my own – as the old saying goes, variety is the spice of life. I've become friends with Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Baha'is, and Jews, in addition to Atheists, Agnostics, and those who prefer not to place their spirituality within the confines of a title. My sister chose to become Catholic upon her marriage, and her children are now in a school system similar to the one in which I was raised. I love them dearly, and they love me. At the end of the day, what it really comes down to is that religion is not for me. I don't feel the need to rely on anyone other than myself and those close to me, nor do I long to be certain of life after death. For me, it is enough to know that I am doing my best to live my life with an open mind, an open heart, and a desire for good. I like to think that if I had a cup of rice, it would be full.